



Editorial

Civil society in Europe ends the year at a crossroads, and nowhere is this felt more sharply than among health NGOs. As this first year without operating support from EU institutions draws to a close, the bloc is negotiating a new financial framework in which the prospect of lower investment and weaker ambition on both urgent health priorities and civil society participation is **alarmingly real**. At the very moment when evidence shows that strong, independent civic actors are indispensable for healthy societies and democratic, evidence-based policymaking, the funding that sustains this work is receding. Rather than consolidating the lessons of the pandemic and recent crises, the current trajectory risks a thinner, more fragmented approach to health and democratic participation at EU level.

Our end of year reflections therefore turn on a pressing question: **how can we, as civil society, continue to deliver on our mission effectively, while navigating an ever more challenging environment in which our existence is made precarious and our legitimacy increasingly contested?**

Civil society on the brink, despite evidence of its impact and irreplaceable role

A familiar refrain has echoed through panel discussions, news articles and the many coffee conversations that take place daily across Brussels: **civil society is being stretched to breaking point precisely when the European Union needs it most**. This warning, voiced in different ways across many fora, captures a shared unease about the mounting pressure on civic actors at a time of deepening social, health and democratic challenges.

Over 2024–2025, EPHA's work on civic space, funding cuts and democratic resilience in the health ecosystem has shown a pattern: **expectations of civil society keep growing, while core support gets eroded**. Health NGOs are asked to monitor and contribute to policies, bring in citizens' voices, counter disinformation and hold powerful interests to account; all the while, the resources that make this possible are withdrawn. The absence of operating grants in the 2025 EU4Health Work Programme, coupled with proposals to fold the programme into broader EU budget lines with no earmarking for health civil society in the next EU budgetary cycle, starkly embodies this broader squeeze on the very organisations that safeguard health policy's transparency, evidence base and accountability.

An [external study](#) underpinning the European Commission's EU4Health interim evaluation tells a different story from the one implied by current budget choices. **The study confirms NGOs receiving operating grants deliver on their commitments**, meet agreed targets, and use public funds responsibly and meaningfully, actively bringing technical expertise and community input into EU health policy. The study also highlights that these grants are hardly replaceable for sustaining independent, long-term efforts in prevention, health equity, and patient rights.

We hope those who made it this far into this editorial won't settle for the line: scrapping these grants is regrettable, yet inevitable belt-tightening in tough times. We are witnessing a process that risks diminishing civil society's voice in the spaces where evidence, accountability, and watchdog roles are most needed. With operating support to civil society being a marginal fraction of the EU health and overall budget, it's hard to see how this delivers economic, let alone social, gains.

A needed course change: EPHA's commitment, and evidence from the field

As 2025 ends, we remain convinced that the EU still has time to correct course, recommitting to a thriving civic space and a robust health architecture. Immediate action is needed to reinstate operating support for civil society within the 2026 EU4health Work Programme. And, in the longer term, the focus needs to stay on designing the next EU budget so that it can tackle health and democratic challenges.

EPHA and its members stand ready to continue delivering, bringing evidence to the table, amplifying communities' voices, and working with institutions to build healthier, equitable, and resilient societies. To do so, we need a policy and funding environment that gives due weight to our proven contribution and provides the stability required to plan beyond the next project call. The hope for the year ahead is that EU leaders will **consider the evidence, heed the warnings, and choose to invest in health(y) civil society.**

Against this backdrop, we reiterate the strong appreciation for the many partners and allies across sectors and institutions who have spoken up, built coalitions, and provided key support to defend civic space and health funding in these challenging times. Their support has helped keep attention on what is at stake and has shown that having civil society as a strategic partner remains a smart and effective choice, in health and beyond.

Many of them have contributed to this edition: **Carlotta Besozzi from Civil Society Europe** explains why [an ambitious EU Civil Society Strategy](#) is now indispensable; **Vesna Kerstin Petrič from the Ministry of Health of Slovenia** discusses [how to bring the World Health Assembly Social Participation resolution to life in EU governance](#); **EPHA advisor Philippe Vandenbroeck** examines [the systems impacts of eroding civic space](#); and **Faustine Bas-Defossez from the European Environmental Bureau** shows [why cross-sector solidarity is central to safeguarding democracy, the environment and public health](#).

Europe's leaders are quick to say that health is an investment, not a cost. The same holds true for the civic infrastructure that supports it. Yet both remain the first line of budgetary sacrifice. Whether the next decisions treat health and civil society investments as assets or as expendable costs will determine the direction of travel. The window to correct course is narrow, but it is not yet closed. What Europe does with it will matter.

Authored by

[Sara Bertucci](#)

Policy Manager



[Milka Sokolović](#)

Director General



This Month's Top Stories



A Long Awaited EU Strategy for Civil Society

Several aspects of the strategy are welcome, such as the Civil Society Platform – a regular and structured framework for dialogue between the Commission and CSOs.

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Europe is unwell

Not only because of polluted air, toxic chemicals, rising temperatures or collapsing ecosystems – but because the very antibodies that protect our democracies are being weakened.

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Reclaiming Democracy through Civic Association, Imagination and Vigilance

If we are to rebuild a democratic ecosystem capable of resisting these pressures, we must move beyond defensive crisis-management.

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Why civic space is not optional for democratic health governance

Amid polarization, democratic backsliding and persistent health pressures, European CSOs face political pressure, mistrust and funding cuts.

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Recent EPHA Events



Roundtable - Crises, cuts and civil society: reclaiming public health leadership in Europe

This roundtable brought together CSO leaders, policy-makers, and international partners to reflect on how to safeguard civil society's role in health, and to gather shared messages for advocacy in Europe and beyond.

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Webinar - Tackling Antimicrobial Resistance in Food Production: A One Health Perspective

European Public Health Alliance and Una Europa Alliance gathered leading international experts to discuss how science, policy, and coordinated action can help mitigate AMR across the food production chain.

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EPHA Updates



Joint Public Health Statement on Gaza

The statement recognises the overwhelming evidence of systematic destruction in Gaza, widely characterised as meeting the threshold for genocide.

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Where Evidence Informs Action

Call for Cases: "From Science to Practice in Food and Health"

[Fill in our Survey](#)

[HDHL Food4Health](#) is looking for real-world examples where scientific knowledge (evidence or R&I solutions) was taken up in practice in shaping decisions, behaviors, or structural changes in the food system.

Your input will help inform the setting of future research, innovation, policy, and implementation (RIP) priorities. Shortlisted examples will be featured in a

Compendium of Good Practices, guiding EU and national R&I priority setting and giving visibility to your work in a FAIR, Europe-wide repository.

Examples sit at the intersection of food and health, and can include cases that led to:

- **science democratization** (e.g. campaigns, pilots, tools used by citizens; knowledge uptake by society, public understanding),
- **policy uptake** (e.g. evidence informing strategies, regulations),
- **new multi-actor processes** (e.g. mirror groups, national consultancy groups, stakeholder dialogues).

Cases can come from any European initiative such as HDHL, ERA4Health, FutureFoodS, FoodPathS, or even efforts outside Europe!

[FILL IN OUR SURVEY, INFORM ACTION](#)



What's on your plate could save 89,000 years of life – every year

A new EU-funded study shows that what we eat – and the food environments that shape those choices – could dramatically reduce disease burden and environmental harm across Europe.

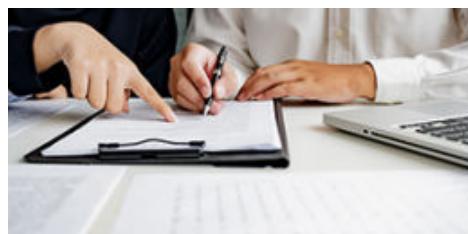
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EPHA joins public health community urging the EU to stick to 2035 engine phase-out

Phasing out polluting cars will mean cleaner air, fewer hospital visits, healthier children, and longer, more active lives for all Europeans.

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EPHA joins health organisations lodging a complaint on 2025 EU4Health operating grants

The complaint follows an unanswered letter sent to the European Commission and HaDEA on September 2 of 2025.

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Healthy indoor air is a right and a prerequisite for resilience: a European call with global relevance

This is a European perspective, but Europe is not alone in the challenge of securing healthy indoor air.

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Food Policy Coalition Urges EU to Place Healthy Diets at the Core of Cardiovascular Health Plan

The letter stresses that Europe cannot reduce its cardiovascular disease burden without implementing robust policies that tackle unhealthy diets head-on.

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EPHA delivers joint statement at WHO Europe RC75

EPHA delivered a joint statement on behalf of 18 civil society organisations, welcoming the Second European Programme of Work (EPW2) as a forward-looking and inclusive framework.

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EPHA joins over 170 organisations in signing the Healthy Planet Now Open Letter

The initiative emphasises that the climate crisis is a health crisis, affecting the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the communities we live in.

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OPINION

Framing action for cardiovascular health in Europe: Reflections on the new EU Safe Hearts Plan

By Sara Bertucci and Jaisalmer De Frutos Lucas

european public health alliance

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Framing action for cardiovascular health in Europe: Reflections on the new EU Safe Hearts Plan

Publication of the European Commission commitments to improving cardiovascular health in Europe, unveiled as "[Safe Hearts Plan](#)", has been much anticipated and marks a significant moment for public health in Europe.

It is encouraging to see many of the priorities championed by the public health community, and advocated by the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) and its members in our [Vision and Strategic Recommendations for the EU Cardiovascular Health Plan](#), reflected in the final Communication.

[READ EPHA'S FULL RESPONSE](#)



Addressing Hidden Hunger in Europe: New Insights from the Zero Hidden Hunger EU Project

EPHA is excited to share that the **Zero Hidden Hunger EU project**'s comprehensive policy review on micronutrient deficiencies has now been published in *Frontiers in Nutrition*. The article presents comprehensive mapping of micronutrient-related policies at both EU and national level across Europe. It reveals that, despite Europe's strong food systems, deficiencies in key vitamins and minerals remain widespread and unevenly addressed. The review highlights who is most affected, where current policies fall short, and what can be learnt from successful national approaches. This publication marks an important milestone for the project and provides a strong foundation to support future policy dialogue and action against hidden hunger in Europe. The findings of the policy review are further discussed in a [blogpost](#).

[READ THE SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATION](#)

News From Members



**European Independent Foundation
in Angiology/Vascular Medicine**
Education - Research - Prevention

Applications open for the next edition of the VAS European Master in Angiology

January 2026

The European Master in Angiology/Vascular Medicine is a premier educational program designed to foster a comprehensive European perspective in the field of vascular medicine (angiology, synonymous). Tailored for medical doctors, this program aligns with the UEMS European Training Requirements, ensuring that participants receive top-tier training and professional development.

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Upcoming Event

Lifestyle Medicine



in Practice

Tuesday, 10th February 2026

9:30am-16:30pm

Online Webinar

Lifestyle Medicine in Practice Seminar

10 February 2026 09:30 - 16:30 | Online Zoom Webinar

This event will showcase Lifestyle Medicine in practice. It will provide the data that lifestyle medicine is the foundation and solution to making a difference in reducing the impact of long-term health conditions for ourselves, and our patients.

[REGISTER](#)



When should children start using nicotine?

Most parents will answer without hesitation: **NEVER**

A donation to ENSP is a way to turn that answer into reality for children across Europe.

Support ENSP today: Because no child should grow up in a world designed to addict them

The tobacco pandemic causes the death of 700.000 European citizens every year. Compared to the rest of the world, the WHO European Region has one of the highest proportions of deaths attributable to tobacco with around 50% of smokers dying prematurely from tobacco-related diseases such as various types of cancer, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.

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ERS Interactive Education: Decoding COPD biology

The latest instalment of the ERS Interactive Education video series is now available on the ERS Respiratory Channel.

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Spring Conference & Annual General Meeting (AGM) 2025

Feb 12, 2025

Osteopathy Europe is pleased to announce that its Spring Conference & Annual General Meeting (AGM) 2025 will take place in the beautiful island setting of Mallorca, Spain.

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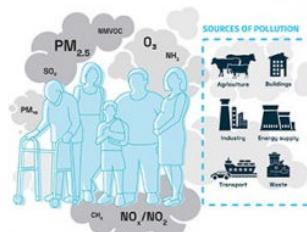
Other News



Shifting the Focus: A Case for a Positive Mental Health Framework in Europe

This open letter argues that current approaches remain overly focused on severe mental health problems and institutional care, overlooking the broader continuum of mental health - emotional resilience, life satisfaction, and social connectedness.

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New Infographic: Health Impacts of Air Pollution and the Urgency to Reduce Emissions

Poor air quality carries substantial health impacts and a significant economic cost, amounting to hundreds of billions of euros each year in healthcare expenditure, lost productivity, and reduced quality of life.

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EPHA Reaction to the 2025 State of the Union Address

As a trained doctor, President von der Leyen rightly underlined how damaging disinformation can be to vaccination campaigns and global health security. With the right choices, this mandate could truly deliver lasting health, sustainability, and trust, in Europe and beyond.

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Bridging Barriers: Expanding Health Navigation for Marginalised Communities in Europe

A recent study across Germany, Greece, Spain, and France found that 11.6% of adults who needed medical or dental care in 2019 reported unmet needs.

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EPHA WISHES YOU A

Happy Holiday!



EPHA (AISBL) is the European Platform bringing together public health organisations representing health professionals, patients groups, health promotion and disease specific NGOs, academic groupings and other health associations.

Our mailing address is:
European Public Health Alliance AISBL, Rue de Trèves 49-51, Brussels 1000, Belgium

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